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The Violence and Monstrosity of Time: The Symbolism of Oceans and the Representations of Leviathan and the Kraken in English Poetry and Literature

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The Violence and Monstrosity of Time: The Symbolism of Oceans and the Representations of Leviathan and the Kraken in English Poetry and Literature

La violence et la monstruosité du temps : le symbolisme des océans et la représentation du Léviathan et du Kraken dans la poésie et la littérature anglaises

Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay

1 In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, the sea appears as a negative symbol of eternity and a tragic metaphor when the chorus declare that it would be better not to be born, since human life is like a shore perpetually beaten by the raging oceans dashing against it (Chorus, Fourth Episode). Besides, in the Bible, the sea and the monsters inhabiting it, particularly Leviathan, the creature from the abyss,[1] are evoked in the books of Job (7.12; 41.1-8), the Psalms (74.14; 104.26), and Isaiah (27.1): "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea".[2] Only God is able to keep at bay and control this symbol of original chaos lying dormant in the depths. But on no account should Leviathan ever be roused (Job, 41.10). In spite of this theology of grace that promises the ultimate destruction of the Beast, Leviathan embodies the survival and persistence of primordial evil and will represent a permanent threat till the end of time.

2 Sea voyages had always been a source of danger and terror since the Antiquity, as Homer's *Odyssey*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) amply show. The metaphoric and symbolic constructions these voyages gave rise to in myth and literature can therefore easily be accounted for. In "Pre-Modern

Images of Crisis; or Shipwrecked in the Sight of God" (*Images of Crisis*, 2007),[3] George P. Landow focuses on the "Journey-of-Life *topos*" and tales of "man shipwrecked and cast away", showing that before the end of the eighteenth century:

> For Augustine, for Dante, for Chaucer, the journey of life was primarily a movement towards God, a voyage to the second Eden [...]. Renaissance authors retain this idea, yet add as their favorite variations the Ship of State and the Ship of Fools. [...] [w]hen the shipwreck *topos* appears [...], it functions as a metaphor for punishment; test or trial; or means of spiritual education.

This is the very rationale behind all of Gulliver's or Robinson's adventures and tribulations. Robinson weathers several storms and it should be noted that the description of the final one that brings him to the island features many elements pertaining to the theories of the sublime. Indeed, the "raging wave" overtaking the ship is depicted as "mountain-like", and because of its "fury", the crew are "all swallowed up in a moment", an ambiguous verb evoking both drowning and devouring ("I Go on Board in an Evil Hour", 48). The sea is personified and it relentlessly chases Robinson "high as a great hill, and as furious as an enemy" (48), as if it were animated with active malice. A wave "burie[s]" (48) him "in its own body" (49), before he is released, cast upon the shore and nearly escapes being "strangled in the water" (49), desperately struggling against this sea that is "after him" (49).

3 In the second part of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke not only presents the ocean as one of the sources of the sublime (section II, "Terror"), but also mentions Leviathan as a sublime element in the fifth section of part II, entitled "Power".

> Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too [...]. And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater. A level plain of a vast extent on land, is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean; but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself? [...] the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime. (Burke, II, section II, "Terror", 53-54)
>
> The magnificent description of the unicorn and of leviathan, in the same book [of Job], is full of the same heightening circumstances: *Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee? [...]—Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant forever? shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him?* In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror [...]. (Burke, II, section V, "Power", 61)

4 Burke's aesthetic treatise, and the Romantics' turning to Ancient Greece, largely contributed to the resurgence of these sea images from tragedy, myth, and the Bible, and to their becoming major pictorial themes—Turner's works being a case in point—,[4] but also literary ones, epitomizing terror and the sublime, and symbolizing the inexorable power of time. In "Pre-Modern Images of Crisis; or Shipwrecked in the Sight of God", G.P. Landow writes that "the Journey-of-Life *topos* increasingly characterizes Western culture from the late eighteenth century to the present day [...]. But by the last years of the eighteenth century shipwrecks and castaways enter poetry, fiction, and painting with increasing frequency [...]".

5 I should therefore like to examine the different modalities and variations of these literary and poetic images that, from the Romantic period on, provided a figurative and agonized response to the violent episodes of contemporary history, and were "born of a sense of

crisis, the sense, in particular, that one ha[d] seen the old guides, the old destinations, the old truths vanish" (Landow). The texts under consideration convey the tragic vision of a world given over to the resurgence of the forces of chaos, and abandoned by God. As G.P. Landow points out: "One might say, therefore, that whereas the traditional shipwreck takes place in the *presence* of God, it is precisely the point of the modern one that it occurs in His *absence*".[5]

6 Owing to the impact of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the Industrial Revolution, the late 1790s and early 1800s marked, and were felt as, the end of an era from all points of view: politically and historically, socially, ideologically and aesthetically. The furious oceans and their monsters answered poets' need to represent existence in this new unsettling world. They served to metaphorize the excessiveness and violence of time, the backlashes of history, thereby expressing both individual and collective trauma.

7 At first sight, the apparent eschatological teleology in Tennyson's poem "The Kraken" (1830)[6] represents a notable exception, as it envisions the definitive death and destruction of the Beast from the abyss at the end of time, with lines 13-15 directly echoing the Book of Revelation (8.8-9). The world shall then be purged and purified by fire and the resurgence of the Leviathan-like Kraken from the "abysmal sea" and the age-old depths will mean its final destruction. This is at least the explicit or surface meaning of the poem.

> Below the thunders of the upper deep;
> Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
> His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
> The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee
> About his shadowy sides: above him swell
> Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;
> And far away into the sickly light,
> From many a wondrous grot and secret cell
> Unnumbered and enormous polypi
> Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.
> There hath he lain for ages and will lie
> Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep,
> Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
> Then once by man and angels to be seen,
> In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

8 But by and large, the works of my corpus obviously break with both the optimistic, and teleological vision of Enlightenment philosophy, and with the "theology of grace" present in the book of Isaiah, in *Robinson* or, more ambiguously and problematically, in "The Kraken". They express man's frustrating relation to the divine, and his angst-ridden experience of personal and collective history as random, disorienting and discontinuous. Indeed, in Shelley's or Coleridge's poems representing sea voyages, the ships are either tossed by storms, becalmed, or drifting uncontrollably and aimlessly, a very apt representation of human powerlessness in front of time and history. But this also images the ever-frustrated quest for meaning, power and artistic control. Therefore, the gales could have another significance, a radically different, albeit complementary, one. As John T. Irwin writes in *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (1983): "As a trope of poetic inspiration, the violent wind that overwhelms the writer's 'vessel' and carries him off into the sublime is a common Romantic counterpart of the image of a hidden fountain or overflowing stream" (86). The

storm paradoxically means death, or at best destruction, but it is the price to pay for creation. Just like the "antenatal tomb" Shelley evokes in "The Sensitive Plant" (1820, Part II, l. 53), the abyss and furious oceans (of time) stand for the uncanny conjunction of an end and a beginning. The terror of death is the driving force giving birth to artistic creation, but Romantic poets recurrently show that they write at the peril of their life, and that creation exposes them to a death-like descent into the abyss, and to an encounter with Leviathan and his likes.

9 Therefore, the significance of Tennyson's Kraken goes beyond an exclusive univocal Biblical and metaphysical interpretation. It is not a mere embodiment of primordial evil. Indeed, in a letter to Hawthorne, dated (17?) November 1851, and therefore slightly posterior to *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (1851), Melville who was already composing *Pierre* (1852), remarked: "So, now, let us add *Moby-Dick* to our blessing, and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens".[7] This can be understood as a tribute to Tennyson's poem—that Melville presumably did not know about when writing *Moby-Dick*—and to the poetic and psychological reverberation of Tennyson's creature from the abyss. The Kraken is both God's enemy and God's ally and servant. He is the guardian of everlastingly forbidden secrets that shall only be disclosed to man at the end of time. In the poem, his representation reflects his ambiguous significance. He is a perplexing mixture of loathsome *and* mysteriously fascinating attributes, the latter being summed up by line 8—"From many a *wondrous* grot and *secret* cell" (My emphasis)—, which expresses the irresistible, spell-like attraction of unknown and hidden realities. The Kraken can be seen as abjectly or grotesquely sublime, in a way reminiscent of Victor Hugo's "Théorie des trois âges" ("Theory of the Three Ages") in *Préface de* Cromwell (1827).[8]

10 Disgust is epitomized by the "sickly light" (l. 5): the atmosphere around the Kraken is literally murky and unhealthy but "sickly" can also be regarded as a hypallage expressing the onlooker's nausea—possibly the lifelong punishment for seeing what should never have been seen. The poem is dominated by the lexical fields of slime, viscosity ("polypi", l. 9, "sea-worms", l. 12), the amorphous, parasitic growth and the pathological—a polyp belonging to the zoological *and* the clinical fields, as a flaccid tumour or an excrescence. The run-on-lines, such as "[...] above him swell / Huge sponges of millennial growth and height" (l. 5-6), evoke the unstoppable, and endless "battening" (l. 12) of the Kraken who owes his monstrous growth and cataleptic survival to its chancre-like voracity.

11 And the central question, which absolutely conditions the actual significance of Tennyson's poem and by implication, of all the texts of my corpus, concerns the exact identity of its narrator. It would be logical, if not inevitable, to claim that this narrator is God himself since the Kraken lives in the depths, invisible, unknown and unspeakable, and God would be the only one able to know about his immemorial existence, and to see him. The Kraken will only rise from the depths "once" and be revealed "to man and angels" (l. 14) just before his final destruction. We should bear in mind that his "sleep" is said to be "uninvaded" (l. 3). So, how could a *human* being have penetrated the abysmal depths and seen him? And how could a mere human survive such a sight and write about it? If the narrator of "The Kraken" is not God, it means that he is a transgressor and a usurper who takes upon himself not only to reveal the Beast, but to do so long before the right time has come. Like a modern Prometheus, he has robbed God's "fire" (l. 13) to illumine the depths: the realm of the Kraken is indeed a sunless one (like the sunless sea in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"): "[...] faintest sunlights flee / About his shadowy sides [...]"

(l. 4-5). What John T. Irwin writes about Poe's tales is just as adapted to Tennyson's poem: "The womblike abyss that is the goal of so many of Poe's voyagers bears an Oedipal prohibition" (Irwin 70).

12 It is indeed, because God has disappeared,[9] and is felt as absent and obstinately silent, that these stormy voyages into unknown and forbidden regions, and that these sea monsters feature so prominently in Romantic writings, as the two related sides of the same problem: the quest for the absolute and for an answer to the enigma of existence, combined with an obscure sense of guilt at undertaking such a quest. The abyss and its nauseating monsters embody the dark, frightening side of the poetic imagination and represent obscure, and grotesque doubles of the poets themselves. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), Book 6, refers to the imagination as an "awful Power" rising "from the mind's abyss" (l. 594), "Like an unfathered vapour" (l. 595).

13 In spite of its "officially" optimistic ending, Tennyson's poem and its depiction of the monstrous Kraken is particularly disturbing. Likewise, the second part of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1797-98 in *Lyrical Ballads*; second revised version in 1817) and Shelley's unfinished "A Vision of the Sea" (published with *Prometheus Unbound* in 1820) both deal with the role and importance of the poet as witness and narrator, and they both feature variations on the biblical model of Leviathan as a hideous sea serpent. It is characterized by its "adamantine voluminousness" (l. 140) in Shelley's poem where it manifests itself after a violent and murderous storm. The hurricane itself, symbolically coming from the West (l. 100), is compared to "an arrowy serpent" (l. 103), and it killed the whole crew of the ship,[10] the only survivors being twin tigers and "a woman more fair/Than Heaven" (l. 66-67), sitting at the helm and clasping a "bright child" (l. 69), fearless of the lightning and thunder (l. 70), an innocent child who would like to play with the tigers.[11]

14 In Shelley's poem that may be read as the externalization of the psychomachia raging in the poet's mind, one of the tigers fights against the sea snake but it is impossible to know what the exact outcome of their fierce tussle would have been, as the tiger seems to be shot by the men from a passing boat (l. 152-156). We do not know either what becomes of the woman and her child. The ship is sinking, and they presumably drown: "The child and the ocean still smile on each other, / Whilst—" (l. 168-169). The fact that the poem was left unfinished may not be the sole explanation for this inconclusive scenario. Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" poem never evokes the ultimate disappearance and destruction of the sea monster either, and it seems quite doubtful whether "A Vision of the Sea" would have done so, had it been completed.

15 In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the sea and its violence act as a Nemesis while no fault or sin was committed in "A Vision of the Sea": the sinful and gratuitous slaying of the sea bird (the albatross) is directly responsible for the curse that overtakes the ship and marks the return of primitive chaos symbolized by the image of the "slimy things" on the "slimy sea", and the emergence from the depths of an evil spirit:

> Yes, slimy things did crawl with legs
> Upon the slimy sea
> (Part II, stanza 10, l. 125-126)
> The water, like witch's oils,
> Burnt green, and blue and white
> (Part II, stanza 11, l. 129-130)

And some in dreams assured were
Of the spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow
(Part II, stanza 12, l. 131-134)

16 But it is actually in Shelley's very brief ten-line poem, initially composed in 1821, but only entitled "Time" when it was published posthumously by Mary Shelley in 1824, that the metaphoric construction conflating the motifs of time and the ocean and resting on a teratomorphic imagination is most accomplished and powerful. Like "A Vision of the Sea", "Time" can be read autobiographically, as an oblique poetic figuration of bereavement and an elegy, on the sublime mode, on the death of William, the Shelleys' three-year-old son in 1819, and of two other of their children before him. It is also a metaphysical text that transcends the mere personal level.

Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years,
Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe
Are brackish with the salt of human tears!
Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow
Claspest the limits of mortality,
And sick of prey, yet howling on for more,
Vomitest thy wrecks on its inhospitable shore;
Treacherous in calm, and terrible in storm,
Who shall put forth on thee,
Unfathomable Sea?

Indeed, line 6 ("And sick of prey, yet howling on for more") fuses the implicit iconography of Time—Chronos or Saturn—eating his children[12] and that of a voracious and monstrous sea creature akin to Leviathan. In Shelley's poem, it is interesting to notice the shift from the representation of an anthropomorphic, although cannibalistic god, that later came to stand for the black vapours and the dark mood of melancholy, to that of a shapeless and limitless, monstrous man-eating beast.

17 Shelley's man-eating entity is not so bloodthirsty as the ancient god: it finally vomits its wrecked victims, but it is just as terrifying because it is no longer embodied and specifically localized. It therefore appears as more diffuse than the figure of Chronos (or Saturn), and therefore omnipresent, almighty and irresistible, as the enjambments of lines 2-3 and 4-5, and the prevalence of masculine rhymes, suggest.

18 This metaphysical poem rests on the extended metaphor equating time with a dangerous, cruel and powerful sea whose "waters of deep woe" (l. 2) constantly threaten and kill human beings. Ironically, less than a month before his thirtieth birthday, on 8 July 1822, Shelley, who had settled in Italy in 1818, drowned in a sudden storm while sailing back from Livorno.

19 The fact that the anaphoric "Unfathomable Sea" opens and closes the poem conveys the notion of eternity, the endless and inevitable repetition of the same pattern. This "sea" is then called an "ocean of time", which widens its proportions and scope. This metaphoric oceanic world appears as boundless, both horizontally and vertically: "unfathomable" refers to unimaginable depths and has sublime connotations.[13] Shelley had already resorted to this adjective in his 1816 poem *Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude*, to describe existence in "this unfathomable world" (l. 18). Paradoxically, here, the ocean is described as a "shoreless flood" (l. 4) but it also has an "inhospitable shore" (l. 7). Nevertheless, the contradiction is only apparent, as line 4 evokes metaphysical time in the abstract while

line 7 focuses on human time, a painful, hazardous sea voyage at the end of which men are cast away on the "inhospitable shore" (l. 7) of death.

20 Throughout, the poet apostrophizes time (or the sea), personifies it (though it is formless), capitalizes it, and addresses it as "thou" which sounds like a challenge and an accusation.[14] This formidable, ever-hungry sea monster acts incomprehensibly; it should feel satiated with all the victims it swallows up, but it is ever-hungry and insatiable: "And sick of prey, yet howling on for more, / Vomitest thy wrecks on its inhospitable shore" (l. 7-8).

21 In Shelley's poem, human time is not "an ante-room to eternity", and men's life is indeed a "trial" but not "a probationary period that readies one for a higher, fuller existence" to use some of G.P. Landow's terms in "Shipwrecked and Cast Away in the Sea of Time"[15] (*Images of Crisis*, 2007). This irremediably tragic vision of existence that postulates no transcendence or redeeming afterlife accounts for the rhetorical question of lines 9-10. The answer is a foregone conclusion that echoes the desperate statement of the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Better not to be born; if we had the choice, if we knew how painful, trying, and terrible life will be for us, none of us would choose to embark on the sea of time, and to be devoured by the pitiless beast from the depths.

22 Shelley's poem rests on endless repetition that perpetuates human suffering from generation to generation and precludes the possibility of its ever ending.[16]

23 I should like to complete this brief overview by focusing on a twentieth-century work that shows the surprising persistence of the sea *topos* and of Leviathan, namely the first two parts of Osbert Sitwell's (1892-1969) five-volume autobiography, entitled *Left Hand, Right Hand* (1945-1950). It is essential to point out that *The Cruel Month* and *The Scarlet Tree*, though they were published respectively in 1945 and 1946, depict Sitwell's childhood and early years and take place before World War I. In these first two volumes that recurrently evoke the impending doom of Europe (before 1914) parallel to the birth and "growth of the writer's mind", the compelling descriptions of the North Sea storms at Scarborough (Yorkshire) have a very strong and explicit Biblical and tragic symbolism, as obscure harbingers of catastrophe and chaos.

> For days and nights at a time you could hear the pounding shudder of the vast forces throwing themselves upon stone walls and cliffs, and above it, the distress signals that sounded dull and vague, but infinitely sad, in this upheaval of air and water, these wastes into which the avenging spirit had descended [...]. (Volume I, *The Cruel Month*, Book 2, chapter 2, 117)

24 As in Shelley's poem "Time" ("Treacherous in calm, and terrible in storm", l. 8), even when it is calm, the powerful sea stands for an "overwhelming" power and a constant menace, literally dwarfing men and reducing them to utter insignificance, like the street musicians and performers that, as a child, Sitwell saw standing out against "the immense background of the sea, today quiet and controlled, but, because of that, none the less overwhelming: so that their voices, lifted against it, sounded as if their owners were trying to scratch their names upon the granite of the Great Pyramid" (Volume II, *The Scarlet Tree*, Book 4, chapter 3, 219). This metaphoric reference to the Great Pyramid, one of the paradigms of the sublime,[17] may be seen as a return to Romantic origins, to the vogue and fascination of ancient Egypt and Egyptology of the early 1800s.[18] The Nile, its sources and Egypt were central Romantic images symbolising the origins of life, history and inspiration. Indeed, in Shelley's 1816 poem, it is when Alastor's "wandering step" (l. 106) leads him to visit "The awful ruins of the days of old" (108)—among which Babylon

and "the eternal pyramids" (l. 111)—that he gazes on and on "[...] till meaning on his vacant mind / Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw / The thrilling secrets of the birth of time" (l. 126-128).

25 Beyond this probable (un)conscious tribute or echo, what also stands out in Sitwell's text is the imprint *topos*, the representation of man's vain attempt to achieve a form of immortality by leaving traces behind.[19] But here, the voices ironically try to "write" on such impossible material as water, which is paradoxically as resistant, and proof against inscriptions, as granite.

26 In volume II, *The Scarlet Tree*, the scene of the beached whale at Scarborough, that takes place in June 1902, when Sitwell was ten, presents a striking variation on this *topos* with the description of "gangs of small boys [...] cutting their initials on [the] soft, responsive rind", and digging "their penknives into [the] dark flanks" of the dead animal (II, Book 3, Chapter 3, 61). The writer must have been about the same age as them at the time. The miniaturization of the actors and their tools, added to their disproportion with the whale, make the attempt seem even more futile and pathetic, the more so as it succeeds only because the formerly granite-like flesh of the pyramid-like cetacean[20] has been made softer by its incipient corruption, and the inscription on the rotting skin will soon be erased. The episode may be read as a very disillusioned and dark representation of art and creation in a definitively lost and disenchanted world.

27 In this paradoxical and claustrophobic perspective, time looks like "a circular system" in which "the beginning and the end are one" (Irwin 81), so that the pyramid-like whale[21] is both a womb and a tomb, *both* a springboard for writing and creation and a rotting emblem of death. Indeed, if the scene leaves such an enduring impression in the reader's mind, and if the memory of the episode features so prominently in Sitwell's autobiography, it is because it radically shaped his imagination and was a landmark in the birth of his poetic vision.

28 The unexpected and incongruous presence of the whale on this Yorkshire beach intimates the sense of an ending, just as its rotting away on the sand stands for the last few years before the downfall, when the Western world was slowly and inexorably crumbling away. The date of its appearance at Scarborough, namely 26 June, 1902, was initially that on which the Coronation of Edward VII was due to take place. It was postponed till 9 August, 1902 as the future king was diagnosed with appendicitis on 24 June and had to be operated on. However, although the Coronation did *not* take place on June 26, the beginning of his reign is shown as symbolically darkened by this strange omen.

> It was this very summer, 26 June, that a whale, the first I ever saw, was stranded upon the shore, on the sands near the old harbour. A colossal, shapeless and primeval carcase, it reared its useless bulk there for weeks, and seemed in its immensity, that was yet lost against the golden sweep of the bay, to hold in it some symbolism difficult to seize upon; to herald, perhaps, the wrecking of an empire or of a civilisation. [...] It was a long time before the now plainly rotting corpse of Leviathan was removed, and for many days the townspeople avoided the part of the sands upon which it lay [...]. (Volume II, *The Scarlet Tree*, Book 3, chapter 3, 61-62)

29 Ironically, although Sitwell calls it "Leviathan", it no longer appears as a predator and a threat, unlike Shelley's man-eating ocean monster. It is in fact a casualty and a victim of time; it has itself become a wreck "vomited" by the sea. However, it is also a portent and an emblem, eerily fusing reality and myth. This particularly striking scene echoes, but radically subverts, the ending of Tennyson's "The Kraken": "Then once by man and

angels to be seen, / In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die". Indeed, Sitwell's "Leviathan" is finally seen by men, but not by "angels", and it dies—unlike evil, pain and misery—as it rises to the surface. Its death is but the prologue to a bloody tragedy, heralding the onslaught of dark, murderous forces.

30 The First World War[22] that Sitwell's autobiography obsessively adumbrates from Volume I, was experienced as a cataclysm, and as the definitive defeat and demise of civilized, humanistic values. Leviathan here becomes a new symbol of time, a grotesque and tragic symbol of (post)modernity and disintegration, the meeting together of the end and the beginning (the writer's life as a boy and future artist), of corruption and birth, of destruction and creation.

31 Indeed, the whale scene in Volume 2 echoes the rag-and-bone man episode in Volume 1, when Sitwell was but an infant and, as he lay in his nursery at dawn, heard his tragic tune, against the background of the "flayed and bloody" clouds:

> At Scarborough the night nursery [...] looked out above a narrow alley. When the rushing and bellowing winds of the winter ceased for a moment to roar down the passage made for them, tearing the words from the throats of the speakers right away into the void, and only the background of tumultuous seas remained, you could hear very distinctly what was said below. In the winter dawn, before it was fully light, these houses resounded with the loud cry, "Rags and Bones! Rags and bones!" And so it came about that these words were the first I learned [...].
> "Rags and Bones!", the old man used sometimes to shout, sometimes to insinuate slyly, in a voice that was between a song and a whine, into the frozen air, beneath where the fleeces of the sky were now showing their flayed and bloody edges, "Rags and Bones!"... (Vol. I., *The Cruel Month*, Book II, "Let There Be Light", chapter 1, "Rags and Bones", 81-82)

32 More than a century divides the poems by Shelley or Tennyson and this twentieth-century prose autobiography but beyond the apparent temporal, aesthetic and ideological gap between them, they were the products of violently troubled times and disturbed psyches, and are characterized by similar tropes and a common *topos*, and by the same angst at being human, mortal, and an artist doomed to sail and struggle across the hazardous sea of time. What Victor Hugo writes in his *Préface de* Cromwell about the advent of the grotesque in the modern era, in the section entitled "Theory of the Three Ages" ("Théorie des Trois âges") perfectly defines this type of modern tragic consciousness: "It first manifests itself as an invasion, an irruption, a flooding; it is like a torrent overflowing its banks".[23] Oceans, Leviathan and his likes, image violent, unsettling psychological experiences, and externalize negative epiphanies. All is lost from the start, and for ever, yet it is also humanly, morally and artistically impossible to give up the fight.

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NOTES

1. Leviathan, as a voracious monster periodically devouring the sun, is also present in Phoenician and Babylonian cosmogonies.
2. Gustave Doré represented the destruction of Leviathan by God in one of the engravings of his illustrated Bible (1865). Leviathan is also mentioned in the Second Book of Esdras (6.49-53). It is not named explicitly in Revelation (8.8-9) but the Beast shares points in common with it.
3. G.P. Landow, http://www.victorianweb.org/art/crisis/crisis1d.html (last accessed 17 March 2017).
4. *Fishermen at Sea* (1796), *The Shipwreck* (1805), *The Wreck of a Transport Ship* (c. 1810), *The Storm (Shipwreck)* (1823), *Lifeboat and Manby Apparatus Going off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal of*

Distress (c. 1831), *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On (The Slave Ship)* (1840), *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* (1835-40), *Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), and this list is not exhaustive.

5. "[...] whereas the Christian voyage *topos* obviously possesses a clear goal [...], the shipwreck is unmotivated and unmeaning. [...] Similarly, whereas the Christian conception of life as a journey consists in movement towards that clear goal, the shipwreck consists in the interruption of movement, the breaking of a progress. Consequently, whereas the Christian life journey emphasizes meaningful continuity, connection, and duration, the shipwreck communicates an experience of discontinuity, for the shipwrecked voyager [...] is suddenly cut off from his past and thrust into a terrifying new existence. Finally, whereas the Christian voyager belongs to the community of fellow believers, a community of which God is the centre, the shipwrecked voyager finds himself in a condition of essential isolation and helplessness" (Landow, "Pre-Modern Images of Crisis").

6. It was composed and published in 1830, and never reprinted again before 1872, in *Juvenilia* (Tennyson was born in 1809). The form of this poem is atypical as it is a sonnet to which a final alexandrine was added. The Kraken owes a lot to Biblical representations but, according to C. Ricks, Tennyson was also inspired by Scott's *Minstrelsy*, and by T.C. Croker's *Fairy Legends* (1828).

7. I am indebted to my colleague Marc Amfreville, Professor of American literature at Paris-Sorbonne University, for this biographical detail on Melville. The letter can be consulted at the address: http://www.melville.org/letter7.htm (last accessed 17 March 2017).

8. "[...] la muse moderne [...] sentira que tout dans la création n'est pas humainement beau, que le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l'ombre avec la lumière. Elle se demandera si la raison étroite et relative de l'artiste doit avoir gain de cause sur la raison infinie, absolue, du créateur ; si c'est à l'homme à rectifier Dieu [...]" (Hugo 20-21). "Elle se mettra à faire comme la nature, à mêler dans ses créations, sans pourtant les confondre, l'ombre à la lumière, le grotesque au sublime, en d'autres termes, le corps à l'âme, la bête à l'esprit [...]" (21). "Nous dirons seulement ici que, comme objectif auprès du sublime, comme moyen de contraste, le grotesque est, selon nous, la plus riche source que la nature puisse ouvrir à l'art. Rubens le comprenait sans doute ainsi, lorsqu'il se plaisait à mêler à des déroulements de pompes royales, à des couronnements, à d'éclatantes cérémonies, quelque hideuse figure de nain de cour. [...] Il semble, au contraire, que le grotesque soit un temps d'arrêt, un terme de comparaison, un point de départ d'où l'on s'élève vers le beau avec une perception plus fraîche et plus excitée" (27). "[...] Et il serait exact aussi de dire que le contact du difforme a donné au sublime moderne quelque chose de plus pur, de plus grand, de plus sublime enfin que le beau antique [...]" (27).

9. As John Hillis Miller writes in *The Disappearance of God* (1963): "[God] no longer inheres in the world as the force binding together all men and all things. As a result the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to many writers a time when God is no more present and not yet again present, and can only be experienced negatively, as a terrifying absence. [...] [Man's] situation is essentially one of disconnection: disconnection between man and nature, between man and man, even between man and himself" (2).

10. "[...] One after one / The mariners died; on the eve of this day, / When the tempest was gathering in cloudy array, / But seven remained. Six the thunder has smitten, / And they lie black as mummies on which Time has written / His scorn of the embalmer [...]" (lines 58-63).

11. The description of the woman and her son obviously evokes a Madonna with child, so that the scene takes on a Christian allegorical dimension. But if the symbolic interpretation seems fully plausible, the poem must also be read autobiographically as the expression of the violent grief Shelley and his wife felt at the death of their three-year-old son William in June 1819. By then, they had already lost two of their children, among whom Clara, in 1818.

12. Rubens's Saturn in *Saturn devouring one of his sons* (1636-1637) is only just beginning to eat his baby who is still whole, in spite of the blood on his chest where the father is biting off his flesh. Yet, this Saturn still looks (physically) human in spite of his inhuman behaviour while, two odd centuries later, in *Saturne devouring one of his sons* (*Saturno devorando a un hijo*, 1820-23), Goya completely dehumanizes his character who has maniacal, unseeing eyes, and with the shocking and blunt presence of the mangled, bleeding body of his headless and armless son. The child has already lost his right arm and Saturn is in the act of eating up the left one... The two Saturn paintings can be seen on the website of the Prado museum in Madrid: http://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/galeria-on-line/galeria-on-line/obra/saturno-devorando-a-un-hijo-1/?no_cache=1 (Rubens); www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/galeria-on-line/galeria-on-line/obra/saturno-devorando-a-un-hijo/?no_cache=1 (Goya). Besides, Daniel Rousseau's site, "Figures de la parentalité dans la peinture occidentale et les arts visuels (Representations of parenthood in Western painting and visual arts)" hosted by the Child Psychiatry service of Angers (CHU) hospital also features other representations of Saturn: Simon Hurtrelle's statue *Saturne dévorant l'un de ses enfants* (1699), and late fifteenth century manuscripts on the same theme.

13. "Unfathomable" is a recurrent adjective in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (M. Amfreville) that conflates the notions of the fathomless depths of the abyss and the ever mysterious and incomprehensible movements and intentions of the white whale.

14. Likewise, Ahab addresses the male whale as "thou" and it is always referred to in the masculine ("he") as befits a creature that represents both an enemy and an alter ego. Ahab and the whale meet their death simultaneously, like Poe's William Wilson when he kills his double.

15. http://www.victorianweb.org/art/crisis/crisis2i.html.

16. This negatively connoted form of the infinite can be regarded as another variation on the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Part II, section VIII, « Infinity », Burke actually deals with the concept of the infinite both in its spatial and temporal senses.

17. In the first section of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Kant establishes a distinction between three types of sublime (the *terrifying*, the *noble* and the *splendid* sublime, 48), and makes of Egyptian pyramids one of the paradigms of the architectural sublime (49), and of vast temporal scales a vehicle of the sublime (50).

18. It is amply evidenced in the works of Shelley or Thomas De Quincey for instance.

19. Let us quote Shelley's "A Vision of the Sea" again: "And they lie black as mummies on which Time has written / His scorn of the embalmer [...]" (lines 62-63).

20. Turner manifested persistent interest in the sea and its creatures, as his *Sunrise with Sea Monsters* (1845) shows. Strangely, in his *Lifeboat and Manby Apparatus Going Off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signals of Distress* (c. 1831, *V&A*, London), the ship looms darkly on the left-hand side of the canvas, like a dim and black pyramid, or a monstrous whale stranded near the shore.

21. The white whale in *Moby-Dick* is frequently called "pyramidical" (M. Amfreville).

22. O. Sitwell fought during World War I, near Ypres (Belgium) in particular. He left the Army in 1918 with the rank of Captain. So, the autobiography is of course retrospective but it takes added tragic significance when we take into account the fact that it was published after World War II, cumulating the horrors of two wars.

23. "C'est d'abord une invasion, une irruption, un débordement ; c'est un torrent qui a rompu sa digue" (32; my translation).

ABSTRACTS

Until the eighteenth century, the vision of oceans and Leviathan as forces of evil and primordial chaos, only controlled by God, had mainly been influenced by the Biblical tradition. In his 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Edmund Burke reassessed them as paradigms of the sublime. This new status, together with the violent episodes of late eighteenth-century European history, and the Romantics' turning to Ancient Greece—the sea being a major symbol in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*—, accounted for the increasing frequency of the fatal and tragic voyage and shipwreck *topoï* in literature. But this also meant a complete break with the theology of Grace promising the ultimate destruction of the Beast. The poems by Coleridge, Shelley, or Tennyson, and Osbert Sitwell's autobiography express the artists' disorientation in an incomprehensible world forsaken by God, and their experience of creation as compensatory but angst-ridden and "Promethean". This paper will address the way furious oceans and their creatures answered writers' need to metaphorize the monstrosity of time in a godless world, to image individual and collective trauma, and define themselves as creators.

Jusqu'au XVIII[e] siècle, la vision des océans et du Léviathan comme forces du mal et du chaos primordial, que seul Dieu pouvait tenir en respect, était essentiellement d'inspiration biblique. Dans son essai de 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Edmund Burke en fit pour la première fois des modèles du sublime. Ce nouveau statut, les remous de l'histoire européenne de la fin du XVIII[e] siècle, et le fait que les Romantiques aient redécouvert la Grèce antique (la mer étant un symbole majeur dans *Œdipe à Colone* de Sophocle) expliquent la récurrence accrue du tragique et de la mort associés aux voyages maritimes. Mais cette nouvelle approche se démarquait radicalement de la théologie de la Grâce et de la promesse de la destruction ultime de la Bête. Les poèmes de Coleridge, Shelley, ou Tennyson et l'autobiographie d'Osbert Sitwell évoqués ici expriment la désorientation des auteurs dans un monde incompréhensible abandonné de Dieu, et leur expérience de la création comme tout autant consolatrice qu'angoissante et « prométhéenne ». Nous analyserons donc la manière dont les océans déchaînés et leurs créatures répondaient au besoin des artistes de métaphoriser la monstruosité du temps dans un monde sans Dieu, de donner forme au trauma individuel et collectif, et de définir leur statut de créateurs.

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oeuvrecitee Alastor or The Spirit of Solitude, Gulliver's Travels, Kraken (The), Left Hand Right Hand, Moby-Dick, Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (A), Œdipe à Colone, Prelude (The), Rime of the Ancient Mariner (The), Robinson Crusoe, Sensitive Plant (The), Time, Vision of the Sea (A)
Mots-clés: Léviathan, Kraken, abysses, océan, traversée, naufrage, mort, temps tragique, circularité, destruction, création littéraire, pouvoir usurpé, disparition de Dieu, sublime
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